United Nations A/58/PV.1

General Assembly

Fifty-eighth session

Official Records

1st plenary meeting
Tuesday, 16 September 2003, 3 p.m.
New York

President: The Hon. Julian R. Hunte ..... (Saint Lucia)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Item 1 of the provisional agenda

Opening of the session by the President of the General Assembly

The President: I declare open the fifty-eighth regular session of the General Assembly.

Item 2 of the provisional agenda

Minute of silent prayer or meditation

The President: As representatives will recall, at the closing meeting of its fifty-seventh session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 57/338, condemning the attack on United Nations personnel and premises in Baghdad. As President of the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session, I take this opportunity to express my condolences, and those of the Assembly, to the families of those who lost their lives as a result of this attack on the United Nations, an Organization that stands for, and has dedicated itself to, the service of mankind. The Secretary-General himself identified this tragedy as "a direct challenge to the vision of global solidarity and collective security rooted in the Charter of the United Nations" (A/58/323, para. 2).

Today, as we begin a new session of the General Assembly, it is necessary that we reaffirm our full support for the United Nations and our respect for its dedicated staff, who, whether in the field or at Headquarters, through their untiring efforts and commitment to United Nations principles and ideals give their all, sometimes paying the highest price for the cause of peace. We must recommit ourselves to the safety and security of United Nations personnel.

Before I call on representatives to observe a minute of silent prayer or meditation, in accordance with rule 62 of the rules of procedure, I propose that as we do so, we also pay tribute to the colleagues in the Secretariat of the United Nations who lost their lives or were injured in the bombing of the United Nations offices in Baghdad on 19 August 2003.

In that spirit, I invite representatives to stand and observe one minute of silent prayer or mediation.

The members of the General Assembly observed a minute of silent prayer or meditation.

Item 126 of the provisional agenda

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/58/360)

The President: Before turning to the items on our agenda, I should like, in keeping with established practice, to invite the attention of the General Assembly to document A/58/360, which contains a letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly in which he informs the Assembly that 14 Member States are in arrears in the payment of their financial contributions to the

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

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United Nations within the terms of Article 19 of the Charter.

I should like to remind delegations that, under Article 19 of the Charter,

> "A Member of the United Nations which is in arrears in the payment of its financial contributions to the Organization shall have no vote in the General Assembly if the amount of its arrears equals or exceeds the amount of the contributions due from it for the preceding two full years."

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of the information contained in document A/58/360?

It was so decided.

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

Credentials of representatives to the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly

(a) Appointment of the members of the Credentials Committee

The President: Rule 28 of the rules of procedure provides that the General Assembly at the beginning of each session shall appoint, on the proposal of the President, a Credentials Committee consisting of nine members.

Accordingly, it is proposed that, for the fifty-eighth session, the Credentials Committee should consist of the following Member States: Antigua and Barbuda, Cape Verde, China, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Fiji, New Zealand, the Russian Federation and the United States of America.

May I take it that the Member States that I have mentioned are hereby appointed members of the Credentials Committee?

It was so decided.

Address by the President

The President: The leadership of the General Assembly — the United Nations' sole universal organ — at its fifty-eighth session is, for me, a solemn commitment. I am deeply honoured by the privilege that the membership of the Assembly has accorded me, to serve in this high office at this time of serious challenge for the Organization and for the world.

This is also a significant occasion for the Government and the people of Saint Lucia. The United Nations has always been a bedrock of our foreign relations, and we have demonstrated our commitment to the Organization through our sustained support for, and participation in, its work. I wish to pay special tribute to the Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, The Honourable Kenny D. Anthony, whose personal commitment to the United Nations and multilateralism underpins this presidency.

My commendation goes to my predecessor, His Excellency Jan Kavan, for the leadership he provided to the General Assembly in what have been critical times for the United Nations. I wish especially to thank him for his cooperation and support, and for the important contribution he made towards implementing the letter and spirit of the General Assembly's decision to hold early elections for the presidency so as to allow for a smooth transition from the outgoing to the incoming President. I want to assure Mr. Kavan that we will be building on the accomplishments of the General Assembly under his leadership.

It has been said that no one leaves footprints in the sands of time by lying down. The footprints of our Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, are indelibly etched in the sands of time because of his continuing achievements and the pace at which he works on behalf of our United Nations. I commend him for his dedication and commitment, and I look forward to working closely with him to realize the goals and objectives of the General Assembly.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Sergio Vieira de Mello, Special Representative of the Secretary-General, other United Nations staff and all who lost their lives or were injured in the terrible tragedy in Baghdad. It is important that we support United Nations action to protect its staff from terrorist attacks. I believe that the United Nations should remain focused on its objectives in Iraq: to facilitate the restoration of peace and security and to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the restoration of sovereignty to the people of Iraq. This would be the most fitting tribute to the sacrifice and hard work of Mr. Vieira de Mello and his colleagues.

In these turbulent times, the world's people are looking to the United Nations to safeguard what is

fundamental to them, from sustainable development to peace and security. The Organization is challenged to live up to these legitimate expectations, which can be met only by holding firmly to the principles and purposes of the Charter, particularly its vision of cooperation among Member States in solving international problems.

Today, the United Nations finds itself at a critical juncture, challenged by an extraordinary set of circumstances and the magnitude of new and existing problems.

What, then, should the United Nations do? We must actively pursue the benefits of multilateralism. We must reaffirm the central role of the United Nations, which is the most important multilateral organization ever established and which has stood the test of time. We must uphold the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter and international law. We must reassert the authority of the General Assembly as the sole universal organ charged under the Charter with important supervisory and policy-making responsibilities.

An examination of past sessions of the General Assembly confirms the commitment made by successive Presidents to the reform of the United Nations, in particular to revitalizing and strengthening the Assembly. The imperative of reforming the United Nations has not changed. Indeed, in the current international environment, it assumes greater urgency.

There is a view that our 58-year-old Organization requires not just reform but radical transformation. The Secretary-General himself has indicated in recent days that the time may have come for a radical restructuring of the Organization, including a realignment of the principal organs of the Charter. He has further indicated that he plans to make proposals in that regard. I am sure that I speak for all Member States when I say that we look forward with keen interest to any proposals, whether of a procedural or substantive nature, that the Secretary-General may wish to submit for the consideration of the Assembly. Following such a review, the Assembly will be in a position to determine how to proceed, bearing prominently in mind the views which will be presented on United Nations reform by the many heads of State and Government who will be addressing the Assembly in the course of the general debate.

As Chair of the working group on the revitalization of the General Assembly, I propose to assess the Group's work so that we may determine the essential next steps. As President, I am open to other proposals for the revitalization and strengthening of the Assembly.

I believe that, as the saying goes, to understand the future we must look to the past. However, while we should learn from our past experiences; we should not be held back by them. In revitalizing the General Assembly, we must therefore balance continuity with change, determining what to hold on to and what to let go of. We should systematically mark each step that meets with success so that we can hold fast to what we have achieved even as we make the strategic choices for future achievements.

For example, I have consulted the General Committee about implementation of its mandate and enhancing its role and functioning so as to better assist the President in the management of the Assembly. I believe initiatives such as that hold great promise for our revitalization efforts.

Indeed, we are most effective when our goals are achievable. Then, we can act quickly and decisively with cooperation across all regional and other groups and secure commitments from individual Member States to deal with the issues at hand.

During months of wide-ranging consultations, I have been inspired by the assurances I received of renewed interest in the General Assembly and by the generally held view that the global problems and crises challenging the United Nations and the world have opened a window of opportunity for the Assembly to broaden its impact on global affairs. We must therefore move boldly to respond to the critics of the Assembly — not in our words, but in our deeds. Member States must demonstrate the power of multilateralism and the value of the Assembly by ensuring that debate goes hand in hand with action, that solutions fit the problems, and that our Assembly has a prominent role in global initiatives for a better world. I am cautiously optimistic that the Assembly is ready to seize the opportunity and move forward.

Let us begin by placing the General Assembly at the centre of the unfolding global socio-economic transformation. Globalization and trade liberalization,

in particular, are leading the way, changing both the structures and processes of the world economy through a rules-based system. But those twin processes will have failed if they result only in enriching the few at the expense of the many or in creating and accentuating inequity and injustice in the global economy. Further, globalization and trade liberalization are moving at such a rapid pace that most developing countries often have no time to act — only to react. Coming to terms with the rules of the system is posing a serious challenge to many developing countries, even as they endeavour to confront other serious economic problems, including mounting debt, volatile commodity prices, increasing poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In recent years, many developing countries have seen a sharp reversal in the economic and social gains they had made. Also, the global system has yet to recognize the need for special and differential treatment and, far less, to make the necessary provisions for that important purpose. Since participation in the world economy is key to national economic growth and prosperity for all countries, these matters are becoming even more urgent.

The General Assembly has an important role to play in ensuring that globalization and trade liberalization are compatible with achieving equity in the global economy and that the aspirations of all countries for sustainable development, prosperity and peace are met. The Assembly has been the guiding light behind a decade or more of summits and conferences, the objectives of which were to assist Member States, particularly those in the developing world, to meet their development goals. The international community must deliver on the promises made in those forums, more especially in working towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

It has been argued that leadership on global development issues rests with development agencies and international financial institutions, and not with the United Nations. It is a fact, however, that the General Assembly is mandated by the Charter to give policy guidance on development issues. It is the only universal forum in which all Member States may participate equally in the process. Therefore, it is the General Assembly that must ensure coherence in the system.

During the fifty-seventh session, the Assembly started to construct the essential bridge between decision-making and implementation in its initiatives on integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up to the outcomes of major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields. During this session, we must advance this work and take action on other pressing development issues, such as commodities trading and corporate accountability. We will pursue many of these issues through interactive dialogue.

Many developing countries do not have a wide range of development choices available to them and in fact face serious challenges due to their special circumstances. In Mauritius in 2004, small island developing States will again provide leadership on these issues and bring to the fore the broad range of challenges confronting them. They will yet again call for action to address their growing vulnerabilities and the particularly difficult decisions they are forced to make in the current global environment. We urge the international community to support the successful outcome of the 10-year review of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, as well as the implementation of suggested measures arising from the review.

African leaders have themselves taken the initiative for accelerated economic growth, sustainable development, poverty reduction and the improvement of the living standards of the peoples of Africa in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The General Assembly has expressed its strong support for NEPAD. It must now encourage the United Nations system and the wider international community to contribute in a meaningful way to the implementation of the goals and objectives of NEPAD.

The forthcoming high-level plenary meeting on HIV/AIDS will be of critical importance, especially for Africa and for the Caribbean, because of the debilitating effect that this deadly pandemic has had in these regions. Indeed, HIV/AIDS is one of the most significant challenges to development in the countries affected. We hope that the HIV/AIDS high-level plenary meetings and the High-Level Dialogue on Financing for Development, both so critical to socio-economic development, can be driving forces for action-oriented solutions in these areas. We believe that

the Assembly must also address conflict and development, aware as we are that internal conflicts not only impact peace and security, but can also significantly retard socio-economic development.

One of the United Nations outstanding successes is its contribution to the self-determination of a majority of people worldwide whose countries now sit, sovereign and equal, in this General Assembly. The United Nations must remain critically engaged in the decolonization process through the Committee of 24 to ensure that the remaining non-self-governing territories, many of which are in the Caribbean, are able to exercise their right to self-determination.

The United Nations has overall responsibility for keeping the peace and making the world a more secure place, with special responsibility given to the Security Council. Undoubtedly, the peaceful settlement of disputes is still an ideal for which the United Nations must strive, even as internal and inter-State conflicts remain pervasive, especially in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, events in the Middle East continue to be of grave concern to us all. I recall that in my consultations following my 6 June election, there was some expectation as to what might be accomplished by the proposed road map. The situation, however, continues to deteriorate and calls for renewed commitment on all sides and for new ideas and approaches for peace in the region.

The destruction of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad on 19 August demonstrates that the danger is not only to those embroiled in conflict, but also to those who work in the service of the people of the world. Indeed, targeted United Nations involvement can help to break the vicious cycle of internal turbulence and violent upheavals, which lead to economic decline and stagnation and further exacerbate the conflict. The United Nations is a reservoir of experience and expertise for rebuilding countries in the aftermath of conflict and war. In this volatile global environment, we need to provide the Organization with the means to fulfil its mandate to maintain peace and security and to tackle the underlying causes of conflict and war. In doing so, the United Nations must be sensitive to the right of the people of affected countries to find their own solutions. Acting in any other way could well erode the credibility of the Organization.

The General Assembly will have the opportunity to review these important matters when the report of the Security Council comes before it. As required, I will summarize discussion of the report to inform the future deliberations of the Security Council. I expect that both the report and the summary will reflect the crises and challenges the United Nations faces in the areas of peace and security.

On the issue of Security Council reform, we cannot retreat from taking a decision on this matter. For more than a decade, we have deliberated on this issue and have made very little progress. I expect that the pronouncements made on this issue in the general debate of the fifty-eighth session will determine whether the political will exists to move reform forward.

International standard-setting is an area in which the United Nations has excelled. Today, multilateral treaties set standards for the promotion and protection of human rights, including the rights of women and children, and govern important areas of international relations, such as transnational crime, the seas, disarmament and the rising challenge of terrorism.

As we reflect on the second anniversary of the 11 September terrorist attacks and other attacks around the world, we are reminded that we all live in the terrible shadow of terrorism. Not only is terrorism an issue affecting the peace — it also negatively impacts social cohesion and the quality of life, disrupts critical economic activity and destroys infrastructure in the States and regions affected.

I believe that the international community should take a two-pronged approach to terrorism. We must confront terrorism wherever it occurs and in whatever form it takes, and we must address the root causes of terrorism as a long-term solution to halting horrific action by the desperate, misguided and disenfranchised. Even as we fight the scourge of terrorism, however, we must do so with the utmost respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and international law.

The United Nations cannot be expected to carry out its mandates without adequate resources. In this budget year, we should commit sufficient resources to enable the Organization to respond effectively to the present demands of the global community within acceptable parameters of responsible budget management.

Approximately 100 heads of State and Government have decided to participate in the general debate of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly. I will be listening carefully to their priorities, which will provide the framework for the work of this session of the Assembly.

I have often been asked in my consultations what I would wish to be the hallmark of the Saint Lucian presidency. My thinking is clear on that matter. I want this session to be an action-oriented one in which decisions are implemented, and in which we work together for that purpose. The people of the world are looking to us to give them hope, seeing that we are working to implement solutions to their problems. The world cannot afford talks that collapse into stalemates, as unfortunately happened in Cancun. The resulting delays in tackling problems that require urgent solutions allow those problems to fester, causing needless suffering and deterioration into irretrievable situations.

I have high hopes, however, that the General Assembly is ready to break new ground and to record significant accomplishments during the fifty-eighth session. To do so requires us to choose principle over expediency, precision over ambiguity, objectivity over bias and creative thinking over inflexibility. Above all, we need action over inaction. We must ensure that the policies we pursue during this session of the General Assembly serve not only our national and regional interests, but also the interest of all the world's people.

My appeal to the Assembly is that we work together to ensure that this session is remembered as one in which the General Assembly moved forward firmly to re-establish itself as the premier policy-setting body of the United Nations.

Item 8 of the provisional agenda

Organization of work, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items

Letter from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences (A/58/356)

The President: The Assembly will now turn its attention to document A/58/356, which contains a letter dated 9 September 2003 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to the President of the General Assembly.

Members are aware that, pursuant to section I, paragraph 7 of General Assembly resolution 40/243, no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly should be permitted to meet at United Nations Headquarters during the main part of the regular session of the Assembly, unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly. Authorization is thus sought for the subsidiary organs cited in the letter, on the strict understanding that meetings would have to be accommodated within available facilities and services.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to authorize those subsidiary organs of the Assembly listed in the letter from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to meet during the main part of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly?

It was so decided.

The President: Before adjourning this meeting, I would like to inform representatives that there is going to be a very important briefing by the Fire Unit of the United Nations. I request delegations to remain seated for the briefing.

The meeting rose at 4 p.m.